DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 364 748 CE 065 315

AUTHOR Wikelund, Karen Reed
TITLE Motivations for Learning: Voices of Women Welfare Reform Participants.
INSTITUTION National Center on Adult Literacy, Philadelphia, PA.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO NCAL-TR93-10
PUB DATE Nov 93
CONTRACT R117Q0003
NOTE 50p.
AVAILABLE FROM National Center on Adult Literacy, Dissemination/Publications, University of Pennsylvania, 3910 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-3111 (order no. TR93-10: $6; check or money order payable to "Kinko's Copy Center").
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; Career Planning; Educational Attitudes; *Females; *Learning Motivation; *Literacy Education; Participation; *Welfare Recipients
IDENTIFIERS *Welfare Reform

ABSTRACT

A study examined the experiences and perceptions of 27 female welfare recipients who were required to go back to school or lose their welfare benefits. The women were observed as they participated in a highly interactive career and life planning (C&LP) class that met 5.5 hours per day 4 days per week for 1 month. A random sample of the women was questioned informally in small-group and individual conversations, and formal open-ended individual interviews were administered to 15 of the women 5 to 6 months after the class. Quantitative data available from other databases, including the Pathways to Progress database and the Oregon National Adult Literacy Survey database, were also analyzed. The women studied had all been reluctant to participate in the C&LP class, and most would not have enrolled if not faced with cutoff of their welfare benefits. Formal education had not been a positive experience for the women; nevertheless, they identified reasons for wanting further education and training. The C&LP class helped most of the women begin ridding themselves of internalized feelings of inadequacy and begin preparing to make further changes. Welfare reform educational programs were deemed potentially promising alternative interventions to stimulate adult literacy development. (Contains 30 references.) (MN)

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NATIONAL CENTER ON ADULT LITERACY

MOTIVATIONS FOR LEARNING:

VOICES OF WOMEN WELFARE REFORM PARTICIPANTS

Karen Reed Wikelund
Literacy, Language and Communication Program
Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

NCAL TECHNICAL REPORT TR93-10
NOVEMBER 1993

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This work was supported by funding from the National Center on Adult Literacy at the University of Pennsylvania, which is part of the Education Research and Development Center Program (Grant No. R117Q0003) as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, in cooperation with the Departments of Labor and Health and Human Services. The findings and opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of the National Center on Adult Literacy, the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, or the U.S. Department of Education.

NATIONAL CENTER ON ADULT LITERACY, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA, 3910 CHESTNUT STREET, PHILADELPHIA, PA 19104-3111

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 1993 BY
NATIONAL CENTER ON ADULT LITERACY
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my profound respect and gratitude to the 27 women who have been willing to participate in this study. Their interest in the research and their generosity of spirit and time are admirable and much appreciated. Recognition and thanks are also due the director and staff members of Pathways to Progress for the enthusiasm and support they provided. Pseudonyms have been used for both the program's and participants' names to protect individual privacy. Finally, in conducting this research, I owe much to my colleagues, Stephen Reder, Director, and Sylvia Hart-Landsberg, Research Associate, of the Literacy, Language and Communication Program at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Their thought-provoking assistance in the development of research questions and site selection have been invaluable. Stephen Reder also devoted considerable time to compiling and analyzing the quantitative data cited here. Funding from the National Center on Adult Literacy is gratefully acknowledged.

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MOTIVATIONS FOR LEARNING:

VOICES OF WOMEN WELFARE REFORM PARTICIPANTS

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Abstract

Despite expanded efforts to heighten awareness and increase participation in adult literacy training, adults assumed to be most in need are among the least likely to participate. Motivation to participate has been the subject of considerable research. However, research that adopts the "nonparticipant" or "reluctant" participant point of view and situates motivation within individuals' life contexts has been conspicuously missing. This study addresses that gap by documenting the experiences of a group of female welfare recipients who have been required to "go back to school" as part of the national welfare reform movement. Through the voices of these women, one can see how their life contexts—their experiences with schooling, family, work, and welfare—have played a powerful role in the development of their concepts of self, their perceptions of their skills and abilities, and their views of future options. Many of these women exemplify the problem of equating adult literacy with schooling and, more importantly, with competence. The study identifies self-esteem and perceived opportunity structure as key contributors to the formation of individuals' attitudes about the meanings of literacy and motives for participation in adult education and training. A welfare reform educational program is described as a potentially promising alternative intervention to stimulate adult literacy development.

INTRODUCTION

As the country prepares to enter a new millennium, there are multiple and compelling reasons inspiring adults to learn new skills. The nation is struggling to adapt to a global economy and to the rapidly changing nature of work. Many assumptions are being made about the skills that adults need to be part of a world class work force. The nation's public schools are under fire for losing a still unacceptably high number of their students before graduation and for graduating many young adults whose tenuous basic skills make them ill-prepared for the world of work. Working adults are being presented with the need to develop new job skills and to take on new roles and responsibilities if they are to retain their jobs. In addition, the nation's system of public assistance is being restructured to reduce chronic dependence and to develop a more productive citizenry, in part by requiring individuals with low basic skills to participate in training to upgrade their skills in order to seek employment. If adults today are to become and remain economically self-sufficient, they will need to continue to expand their skills and knowledge throughout their lifetimes; they will need to become lifelong learners.

An awareness of the need for effective and continuing adult education and training is not new. The apparent magnitude of the need and the speed with which the world is changing create a sense of urgency. Massive numbers of people are cited as needy, implying enormous public costs: Nearly 30 million Americans have serious problems with literacy; 85% of correctional facility inmates are without a high school diploma and more than 75% lack basic reading and math skills; 700,000 high school graduates are functionally illiterate. Adult literacy has been given the status of being one of six national educational goals. National and state surveys are being conducted to obtain more information on the extent of this basic skills deficit. Two national institutions have been established for the study of literacy and the improvement of its teaching (the National Center on Adult Literacy and the National Institute for Literacy). Adult literacy training programs are being expanded and new programs established. However, adults are not signing up in droves, and those assumed by program designers to be most in need are among the least likely to participate.

To stimulate the ongoing development of many adults' basic skills abilities, a fundamental, underlying question remains to be

explored: What motivates adults to improve their literacy skills? Motivation has been the topic of considerable research on adult literacy participation. (See Wikelund, Reder, & Hart-Landsberg, 1992, for a detailed review of the literature.) However, there continues to be a glaring need for an understanding of motivation situated concretely in the life contexts of adults presumed to need further training. Three characteristics distinguish the study reported here from most others that have preceded it:

- the population studied: female participants in a mandated welfare reform educational program, many of whom had not previously participated in adult education;
- the perspective taken: the life contexts and perspectives of the participants themselves; and
- the identification of key underlying factors which influence individual motivation to participate in formal programs: self-esteem and *perceived opportunity structure.*

This report describes the experiences and perceptions of a group of female welfare recipients who have been required to go back to school as part of continuing to receive the welfare grants on which they and their families depend. As shall be seen, the life contexts of these women—their experiences with schooling, family and relationships, work, and welfare—have played a powerful role in the development of their concepts of self, their perceptions of their skills and abilities, and their views of what the future may hold for them. All of these factors contribute to the formation of attitudes about the meanings of literacy and the motives for participation in adult education and training. This report will further discover how the program in which they are participating is attempting to help them strengthen and expand their views of themselves and their futures.

A. METHODOLOGY

1. SITE SELECTION

There were several reasons for selecting the education track of a Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) welfare reform program, which will be referred to as Pathways to Progress (PTP), as a point of entry to begin this research on participation in adult literacy development. First, it would provide a unique opportunity to observe adults' perceptions of an environment in which basic skills training is being required in response to larger social, economic, and political forces. Legislated changes in public assistance eligibility requirements have led to the development of one of the leading examples of recent attempts to require welfare recipients to participate in training and find employment. Adults at this site have suddenly and involuntarily found themselves in an environment that is attempting to stimulate changes in their skills and knowledge.

This setting is a clear example of the pervasive social values in the United States that directly link individuals' skills with the work they do and with their self-worth. It was expected that the heightened influence of the social, economic, and political issues in this environment would place adult literacy participation in high relief. Both literacy development and engagement in literacy practices are socially constructed activities. It was felt that this site offered a rich opportunity to document the relationship of the values and meanings ascribed to literacy development with actual participation in training and new literacy practices. Of necessity, individuals at this site would be responding to powerful societal and economic forces as they made choices about participation.

The second reason for selecting this site was that it would most likely provide access to a group of adults who needed to improve their basic skills, but who probably had no prior experience with adult education programs. This "nonparticipant" perspective has been lacking in much of the participation research (see Wikelund et al., 1992). Because this was a mandated program, it might include a large percentage of "reluctant" program participants. This hypothesis was based on some assumptions commonly held by a majority of the members in this society: (a) if you are on welfare, you probably have relatively low basic skills and (b) if you have low basic skills, you probably have not participated in adult education or training in the past and are only doing so now because it is mandated.

The implicit acceptance of these assumptions is reflected in statements found not only in the popular press, but in literacy and education publications as well. To cite two recent examples, the *Facts on Literacy* sheet distributed by the new National Institute for Literacy (1991) states that "One third of all mothers on welfare are functionally illiterate." Reporting on the conclusions reached in *The Promise of JOBS*, a national research report by the Southport Institute for Policy Analysis, the Business Council for Effective Literacy (1992, October) notes that "...so many persons [parents] in the AFDC program have very limited basic skills...." These statements are probably based on the widely used but questionable definitions of functional literacy and limited skills as grade level completed or receipt of a high school diploma. As described below, the selection of this research site has provided the opportunity to explore these commonly held assumptions.

The focus of this paper is on literacy development in the contexts of individuals' lives and on an alternative programmatic intervention. However, the definition of participation in literacy development must not be limited to involvement in formal instructional programs. Rather, adult literacy development must be seen as an ongoing aspect of adult life in this society. Adults acquire and polish their literacy skills in both informal and formal ways, and in many diverse contexts and settings. As the author has written elsewhere (Reder & Green, 1985; Wikelund et al., 1992), literacy development must be seen as a form of lifelong learning, not as a set of skills that one learns but never enhances in the future except in structured, intentionally educational settings.

2. METHODS

As Rockhill (1982) points out, qualitative research makes it possible to look at educational participation as it is embedded in learning and begin to understand how learning is embedded in everyday life. Merriam (1989) also notes significant contributions made by the use of qualitative research methodology and believes it has great potential to discover the meanings that people perceive in their lives and experiences. Indeed, the field of adult literacy research has been greatly enlightened and expanded by the qualitative work of researchers such as Fingeret (1983a, 1983b, 1991), Gowen (1990), Heath (1983), Horsman (1990), and Ziegahn (1992), among others. The author's own previous work (reported in Reder, 1987; Reder & Green, 1983; Wikelund, 1990) underscored the power and utility of qualitative methods to allow a deeper and more grounded understanding of how individuals and communities create and recognize the multiple meanings and uses of literacy in their lives.

The use of qualitative methodology is essential if one is to begin to understand adult learners' own perspectives on the role(s) of learning in their lives and the factors that stimulate their engagement in literacy development. Adults create and continually revisit and revise their own motivations for learning. It is essential to understand this process if one is to analyze and promote literacy skills development. The following examples from the recent literature bring home the critical need to understand and recognize the adult learner's perspective. Horsman (1990) details the discovery of the lack of congruence between individuals' goals and those of literacy training programs. In her study of the role of literacy development in the lives of women on welfare in rural Nova Scotia, she found that the women and the literacy programs that served them had conflicting social meanings for the role of literacy in these women's lives. The women tended to see literacy development as a way to get out of the home and away from domestic constraints, whereas the literacy programs presented literacy in a way that reinforced their domesticity and subservient identities. Women entered the program with positive perceptions of the opportunity that it offered only to become disenchanted with its focus. The study of a hospital worker literacy program by Gowen (1990) clearly demonstrates the significance of understanding potential program participants' views on the need for and content of training. Curriculum designers and participants had widely divergent perspectives on what program participants should be studying and how it should be presented.

Quigley's recent study of *reluctant learners* (dropouts) and *persisters* in adult basic education programs underscores the critical need to "see our ABE/literacy programs through the experiences of our learners" (1992, p. 6). Ziegahn's interviews with adults with low literacy skills about their motivations to learn make a very valuable contribution to the understanding of adults' natural inclinations to learn and how these inclinations may conflict with formal training programs (1992). Individuals' perceptions of themselves, the contexts in which they live and work, and the opportunities available to them are critical to the design of appropriate, effective educational training.

The observations reported here are the result of participant observation conducted of a cohort of 27 female welfare recipients as they participated in a highly interactive Career and Life Planning (C&LP) class, followed by informal, random, small group and individual conversations, and formal, open-ended individual interviews with 15 of the 27 participants. The class participation occurred over a period of one month in the spring of 1992, for

5 1/2 hours per day, 4 days per week. The interviews with program participants were scheduled in the fall of 1992 (5 to 6 months after the class) and took place in individuals' homes or at coffee shops selected by the participants. Interviews lasted from 1 to 3 hours, averaging approximately 1 to 1 1/2 hours in length. Topics covered included: (a) activities since the C&LP class, (b) progress toward goals identified then, (c) perceptions of skills, (d) previous educational history (including attitudes about school and goals as a teenager, as well as participation in adult education and training), (e) plans for future education or training, (f) reasons for being on welfare, (g) perceptions about the impact of this program on the participant's life, (h) learning experiences, and (i) perspectives on future opportunities. Informal as well as semistructured interviews were also conducted with the Pathways to Progress program director, data analysts, and four trainers and instructors.

In addition to the qualitative methods used in this research, quantitative data available from other databases were compiled and analyzed to provide a larger context in which to situate this cohort of participants. These databases included the database of all participants at Pathways to Progress (n = 8,242), a subset of that database (n = 1,444), and the Oregon National Adult Literacy Survey database (n = 1,993).

B. THE INTERVENTION

The Pathways to Progress welfare reform program, located in an urban area in the Pacific Northwest, was initially piloted 4 years ago as part of the new federal JOBS welfare reform program. Full implementation began about 2 years ago. It is currently the largest JOBS program in the state. The program attempts to enable those who receive public assistance to find full-time, permanent employment, thus reducing the economic drain on state resources and encouraging the self-sufficiency and independence of state residents.

The program offers a continuum of social, employment, and training services to public assistance clients. It is coordinated by a local community college under contract with the state welfare division and in collaboration with other social service agencies, including the state employment division, the vocational rehabilitation division, and the local Private Industry Council (PIC). All clients whose children are over the age of 1 year old and who are not deferred due to other life circumstances must be screened by this program. Depending on the results of their initial assessment, individuals may be referred to one of two tracks: the Career and Life Planning Track (for those needing to enhance their basic skills and job training) or the Placement Track (for those with marketable skills). While participating in the program, clients continue to receive their public assistance grant as well as a customized mix of services designed to facilitate obtaining job training and finding employment.

This welfare reform program includes the following operational components: screening and assessment, case management, life skills training, intensive basic education and general education development (GED) preparation, English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, vocational training, high school referrals for teens, voluntary work experience, community resource information and referral, job search and placement assistance, on-the-job training, and sheltered/supported work. The definition of successful completion of the program is nonsubsidized, full-time, permanent employment or employment with career potential that, within a short period of time, allows the client to become economically self-sufficient.

The program considers the assessment process as an activity done in partnership with the client in order to determine the best

course of action for each individual. The assessment consists of the Basic Adult Skills Inventory System (BASIS) test and a one-hour interview to identify individuals' skills and interests and decide the direction for their participation in the program. (The BASIS is a competency-based, standardized assessment of functional literacy developed by the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System [CASAS] for use by community colleges and employment and social service agencies in Oregon as a screening tool for planning educational and employment training services.) Staff and client together create an individualized Employment Development Plan.

At the time of this study, clients in the Career and Life Planning Track were spending 4 weeks (4 days per week) in a life skills class that focused on career education and in-depth vocational assessment. Topics covered in the class included self-esteem, work values, effective communication, problem solving, assertiveness, parenting, and support system development. Depending on their skills, career goals, and need for training, clients might then be referred to the Adult Basic Education (ABE) and/or GED program, vocational training or voluntary work experience. Intensive ABE/GED services were offered in a learning lab setting onsite, both one-on-one and in small groups. Clients were required to attend 15 hours per week. Clients averaged approximately 4 months in the ABE/GED portion of their preparation before beginning their vocational training and/or job search.

C. THE PARTICIPANTS

1. CRITERIA FOR SELECTION INTO CAREER AND LIFE PLANNING

As noted previously, clients referred to the Career and Life Planning Track need to improve their basic skills and/or are lacking in marketable job skills or experience. Most have little or no job experience or have been out of the job market for an extended period of time. Some have been referred from the vocational rehabilitation division, under whose supervision they have been dealing with mental, physical, or alcohol or other drug-related problems and are now deemed ready for further training and subsequent employment.

The Career and Life Planning Track staff use the BASIS test as a screening tool for acceptance into this part of the Pathways to Progress program. To be admitted to C&LP, clients must score above 220 in reading on the BASIS to be able to handle the written materials used in the class. Various functional levels of basic skills have been identified based on achievement data for adults enrolled in basic education programs in the state. According to the BASIS/CASAS Scale Score Interpretation for Occupational Planning (Office of Community College Services, 1990), a score between 215 and 230 is considered "nearly employable." This is interpreted as follows:

> *Participants functioning between 215 and 230 are able to handle basic literacy tasks and basic computational skills in a functional setting related to employment. A minimum wage job is possible if carefully selected. They have difficulty following more complex sets of directions and are functioning below junior high level.*

Individuals who score lower than 220, that is, individuals with low-level basic literacy skills, are generally referred to be tested for learning disabilities and/or referred to the community college affiliate for placement in a program designed to provide basic literacy instruction. The average BASIS reading score of clients in the C&LP track has been 242, which is interpreted to mean "functioning at a secondary level and have a high probability of passing the GED with some preparation." The vast majority of individuals who graduate from the C&LP class go on to spend several months either preparing to pass the GED or brushing up on certain basic education skills identified by staff as necessary for

continued success in preparation for their chosen field of employment.

Potential C&LP participants are also carefully scrutinized during the screening interview. The purpose is to enhance further their possibilities of successfully completing the class. Interviewers look for indicators that clients have "all their ducks in a row" and are as ready as they can be for the major changes that participation in training will cause in their daily lives. In addition to asking about clients' feelings about participation and their interests, staff question their plans for primary child care and backup; stable housing; medical, vision, and dental problems; current or needed counseling; legal proceedings; outstanding school or training loans; the need for transportation; and so forth. Experience has shown them that if these types of issues are not resolved, or at least addressed, before a client enters the program, the likelihood of success is diminished.

2. Demographic Characteristics

The data in Table 1 show how the cohort of 27 women, which is the focus of this study, compares with two larger groups of participants regarding education and skill indicators: (a) participants in the C&LP Track, and (b) all participants in the Pathways to Progress (PTP) database (including both those in C&LP and those in the Job Placement Track). The six columns show the number of individuals in each of the three groups; their average BASIS reading and math test scores; their average age; the percentage completing 12th grade, having a high school diploma, or a GED; and the average grade level completed.

Table 1. Basic Skills Scores and Education of Study Cohort Compared with Other PTP Participants

	N	BASIS Reading	BASIS Math	Age	H.S./ GED	Grade Completed
Cohort	27	244	222	30.1	66.7%	10.8
C&LP	1444	240	217	28.5	37.0%	???
PTP	8242	242	223	30.1	89.2%	11.2

As the data show, this cohort has skills (as indicated by test scores) and educational experiences somewhat higher than those represented in the overall C&LP database and similar to the group that includes both individuals in C&LP and those placed directly in the Job Placement Track. The BASIS test scores of the 27 women in the cohort were relatively high, with the average of 244 being the

"pre-vocational" level. The range on reading was from 223 to 257. Math scores were considerably lower, with an average of 222 and a range from 201 to 249.

The average age for this group of 27 women is 30 years old; the range is from 18 to 44. Regarding their ethnicity, 81% are Caucasian, 7% African-American, 7% Native American, and 4% Southeast Asian. The average grade completed in school was 10.8. Nine (35%) of the 26 individuals for whom there are educational data had graduated from high school or completed the 12th grade; one (4%) had gone on to a year of college. The other 16 (61%) had dropped out during high school: 4 (15%) completed 8th or 9th grade, 6 (23%) finished 10th grade, and 6 (23%) completed 11th grade. Seven (44%) of those who dropped out subsequently got their GED prior to participation in this program.

The educational histories of the 15 women interviewed in-depth, who are the primary focus of this paper, were fairly representative of the larger cohort. Average grade completed was 10.67. Four (27%) completed 12th grade or high school, including one young woman who obtained a GED while in her 12th year of high school because she was behind in her classes. The other 11 (73%) dropped out: 3 (20%) dropped out after completing 8th or 9th grade, 2 (13%) after completing 10th, and 6 (40%) after 11th. Five (45%) of those who dropped out got their GED prior to this program, and the other 6 (55%) have been working on it through the program (2 having recently passed).

A look at the characteristics of the 12 women who have not been interviewed in-depth adds to the information about participation within this program context. These women have not been available for a variety of reasons. Since the C&LP class, seven have been temporarily deferred from further participation in the JOBS program due to drug treatment or physical or mental health issues yet to be resolved; three have not been available by phone; and there have been scheduling difficulties with two. Based on the author's previous relationships with these individuals, it is expected that further interviews with them will be conducted as soon as possible and appropriate to their personal circumstances. Their demographic characteristics do not differ greatly from those of the women interviewed thus far. They are a slightly older group; average age is 32. They had slightly more education; average grade completed is 11 and only one third of them still needed to get their GED when they entered the C&LP program. Their BASIS scores were slightly lower; average reading score was 241.

As shall be seen, the women in this C&LP cohort are not dysfunctional in terms of their basic literacy skills. However, many in this group equate their own lack of schooling with low skills and low potential for self-sufficiency. Using BASIS and TABE (Tests of Adult Basic Education) results, Pathways to Progress staff determined that all but four of them needed either to study for their GED or to brush up on some aspect of their basic skills prior to focusing on their specific job or career goal.

The 15 women interviewed have been on welfare from 10 months to 16 years "off and on" (averaging 5.9 years). They have from one to five children; the average number of children is 2.2. Their children range in age from 10 months to 21 years. Their profile is close to that of the average family receiving welfare in this country: a 32-year-old Caucasian female with two children (Griffen, 1992).

D. THE CONTEXTS OF PARTICIPATION

1. LIFE CONTEXTS

To understand the role of literacy development in the contexts of poverty, dependency, and self-sufficiency, the multiple influences that shape it must be recognized: environmental forces; individual goals, determined in part by individual perceptions of self and position in life (including social role, occupation, life stage, or transition); opportunities to achieve identified goals; and the likelihood of success in the endeavor. (See Reder, Hart-Landsberg, Schwab, & Wikelund, 1991, for a detailed review of the literature on these influences.)

Many adult educators intent on understanding adult literacy development and participation in training have attempted to create explanatory theories that incorporate the multiple variables considered to influence the development of literacy skills in adults. These theories have become increasingly complex as they try to represent more adequately the complicated interrelationships of the many factors at play in literacy development. Rubenson's *recruitment paradigm* (1977) emphasizes the role of individual perception; Cross's Chain-of-Response Model (1981) includes self-concept and the significance of life transitions; Darkenwald and Merriam's Psychosocial Interaction Model (1982) expands those concepts and recognizes the influence of socioeconomic status; and Cookson (1986) has revived the ISSTAL Model (interdisciplinary conceptual framework, sequential specificity of relations, time allocation-life span perspective). However, as Benseman (1989) notes, these models that use sophisticated sequential, statistical analyses of a wide range of ingredients still do not portray an understanding of the meaning of participation in the individual's world. It is in the individual's view of his or her life context where understandings about the uses of literacy and the need to participate in order to expand one's skills and knowledge are formed.

A. SCHOOLING

The ways in which the women in the C&LP class describe their school experiences are critical to an understanding of their perspectives on literacy and basic skills development and their subsequent motivation to participate in educational training as adults. Approximately one quarter (27%) of the 15 women interviewed in-depth obtained their high school diploma or their

GED while in high school. Those who dropped out (73%) had various and interrelated reasons: 55% quit because they got pregnant and/or got married; 18% quit because they were working and needed to continue either to support themselves or help support their siblings and parents; 18% reported doing a lot of drugs and having no interest in school at the time; while the remaining 9% had various reasons that included not thinking school was important, disliking school and thinking "I'd never need those things" (what was being taught), or feeling that "there was no point in my doing well....I knew I'd never get to go to college." Many, in retrospect, noted how "stupid" it was to have dropped out, to have ignored their parents' advice, and to have failed to realize what was going to be important and apply themselves.

When asked if it was important to do well in school, three quarters mentioned their increasing interest in partying and socializing in high school. For some, doing well in school ***had*** been important (or at least important to their parents), but when they became teenagers they quickly lost interest. Jackie, for example, remembered wanting people to see that she was doing well, but also realized in retrospect that she did not apply herself then. She was "into boys, smoking, parties—the social thing was more important." Elaine remembered loving spelling and English, but also recalled being "too busy thinking about going out on the hill and smoking." She ended up quitting school because she was trying to work and study and could not do both.

Sally remembered getting good grades as a freshman, but quit in the middle of the 12th grade with a GPA of 1.87. She subsequently got pregnant and then got her GED "right away." Thinking back on it, she remarked, "I had the ability to get 'em [*sic*] [good grades] but never had the desire to apply myself—there was no *praise*—why do good [*sic*] if no one wants you to?" She had no idea what she wanted to do after she got out of school. She just wanted to party. She was not accountable to anyone; her parents and teachers did not ask her to be. "Everyone knew the way I was, but they didn't say 'You need to slow down.' Sometimes you want people to say, 'Why are you doing this self-destructive stuff?'"

Helen noted that it was important to her parents that she do well—but she found she could "slough off" and still pass. She knew she was not doing what she was able to do, but it was not a problem—there was no pressure on her. As a senior, she did not care if she was there or not. It was not until she got married, applied to work at a fabric store, and failed the application process

because she could not do fractions that she realized how little she had known about what she would need for life beyond school.

Not surprisingly, for the 20% who got their high school diplomas, it *was* important to do well in school. "And still is!" according to Becka. Her parents made sure that she always took college preparatory courses, 4 years of science (which she loved) and 4 years of math. She *knew* she was going to go to college, but she was impatient and did not want to spend 4 years at it. Now, when she talks about her 10-month-old son's future, she is exploring different cities as positive environments and is worrying about the quality of their school systems, remarking, "I'm big on school."

Corinne also knew she wanted to continue her schooling. She left school with only 2 months and 3 credits to go. She had been working, and her mother had moved to another state and left her with a big house and bills to pay. She then got pregnant, but went back to high school half-time to get her diploma. Looking around at some friends who did not finish high school and worked in jobs "one step from welfare, day to day, week to week," she knew she did not want to "live like that."

Tiffany also received her diploma. She remembered that it was not important to do well at first. Her philosophy in high school was "let's just have fun, that's it." But her senior year was her best year, and she realized that she had just wasted the other 3 years. As she talked about her current training in office technology, it was very clear that doing well continues to be a high priority for her.

Few of these women reported having any sense while in high school of what they wanted to do once they got out. Some just "didn't think about it." Others assumed that they would "get married and have kids."

B. FAMILY

All of these women did, in fact, become mothers. As noted, they have from one to five children, as young as 10 months and as old as 21 years. All except two of the women in this group have experienced a relationship that has resulted in either separation or divorce. In some cases, they left their husbands; in others, they were shocked to find themselves suddenly without means of support because their husbands had left them. Some relationships were short-lived; others lasted as long as 15 years.

The traumatic issues in the relationships of these women with "significant others" were never far from the surface when they

described their lives. Indeed, their similar experiences helped them connect with each other in the C&LP class and begin to see beyond themselves. Experiences of isolation, dependence, lack of communication and common goals and understandings, lack of mutual respect, abuse (physical, sexual, mental, drug- or alcohol-related), lack of self-esteem, coupled with limited income in many cases and limited work experience, led these women to public assistance and to being participants in this mandated educational program.

The majority of women in this group are surviving in part because of a network of family and friends. This support system may include a boyfriend, "significant other," or (in a few cases) husband; the child's father; their own parent, grandparent, or in-law; their own siblings; their own children; a long-time friend; agency staff (C&LP staff and other agency/therapy staff); and/or friends made through the C&LP class.

Despite the disruptions and traumas in the women's lives, what becomes apparent almost immediately in talking with them is their love and concern for their children. Most of them have been playing out the traditional family role of wife and mother (what Horsman, 1990, calls the "dominant discourse of mothering"). They have strong convictions about the importance of being there for their children, particularly if they are not yet of school age. They place a high value on being a good caregiver. Some made a conscious decision to stay home until their children are in school. The JOBS regulation that initially required mothers of children over 3 years of age to begin the process of finding a job—and then was changed to include anyone with a child over the age of one—seemed to fly in the face of traditional family values. The irony of being judged harshly by society and the system for holding such values dear was not lost on several mothers in this group.

As is common among parents, most hoped their children would not make the same mistakes they did. The value placed on education came to the surface when some talked with pride about their children's accomplishments in school or their hopes for them. Donna proudly pointed out that her three children are "real intelligent [*sic*]," although she humbly notes that she does not know where they get it from. Her oldest daughter was valedictorian and is now in college, and her son is taking trigonometry in high school and wants to be an engineer. The fact that her daughter values what Donna is doing was a major source of support for her. She said her daughter told her proudly, "Do you realize what it takes to go back?"

C. WORK EXPERIENCE

The women in this group have held a variety of jobs, often part-time or relatively short-term and low paying, in traditional entry-level positions usually held by women. The most common job experiences among them have been waitress, fast food or convenience store server/cashier, and office worker. A few have held supervisory or managerial positions at fast food or convenience stores. Other jobs held include: home daycare worker, nursing home housekeeper/assistant, maid, dishwasher, meat market and produce worker, bingo ticket seller, plywood mill dryer feeder, optical lab office worker, cannery and fur pelt processing line worker, freelance artist, small business owner, and homemaker.

A few have seldom worked outside the home. Aside from baby-sitting the same children for 3 years, Diane had only worked a few days as a clerk in a local shop. Maureen got married her senior year of high school and had a full life raising three children until her husband of 15 years left her. At the time, she desperately asked welfare for schooling because she knew she needed to do something to bring in some income, but there was no program available to her. Unaware of her own history of sexual abuse, Marty had successfully controlled her drug use and was concentrating on constructing a safe home for her children, but as yet she was unable to venture into the outside world of work.

Others started working as young as 14. Becka, Corinne, and Sally, the three youngest in the group, each worked a lot in high school—at fast food outlets, convenience stores, and office jobs. Bobbi was a restaurant hostess at 17. She also worked as a cashier and put in a year at a plywood mill. Helen developed and ran several business endeavors with her husband.

2. MEANINGS OF WELFARE PARTICIPATION

A. REASONS FOR BEING "ON THE SYSTEM"

According to the 1992 *Harper's Index*, the number one reason given today for going on welfare is divorce. That such a fundamental change in family structure would be a trigger event causing women with children to need public assistance is not surprising. Among the participants of this study, divorce or separation from a partner was a common reason cited for going "on the system." Another related reason was pregnancy. In a handful of cases, drug or alcohol abuse contributed to remaining on welfare. As noted, for this group the time on welfare has ranged from 10 months to 16 years ("off and on"), with an average of 5.9 years.

Becka went on welfare last January when her baby was born. She was 18. She thought she would just "go get a job," but she soon realized that with a "nowhere job," she would not make any more than on welfare. Because her baby was so young, she was not required to participate in the JOBS program. However, she volunteered because she was "bored stiffless [*sic*]" and through this program she could go to school and get a better job.

Tiffany, now 21, left her husband when her daughter was two months old and returned to live with her own father. She vividly remembered how she panicked when she ran out of formula for her baby. She vowed her child would never go without again. When she signed up for welfare a year ago, her caseworker asked if she was interested in volunteering for this program. As Tiffany put it, she "wouldn't turn down education and paid child care—too good to pass off." She wanted to "go on and off [welfare] and fast!"

Jackie was devastated when her husband asked her for a divorce when she was pregnant with their third child. A little over 2 years later, and with three children under the age of four, she is now beginning to come out of the depths to which her self-esteem had plummeted.

Three years ago, Judy was "banished" from her family when she left her abusive husband and went on welfare. She did not want to be on the system for long periods of time—she never thought she would be on "this long." She had heard it was a trap and now she can see why—security with medical benefits. She loves to work and would be working right now if she could have sufficient medical benefits for her daughter's severe asthma. Because of her daughter's condition, her caseworker considered deferring her from participation in this program. However, Judy wanted to be in it to get the education. She said, "I never thought I'd be in college. My mother is so proud—but it's still 'welfare.'"

Four years ago, Sally had "a brand new baby and free money." Today she sees that she did not realize what she had gotten herself into. She thought she was just getting medical assistance when she signed up, not cash. "Who would want to work?" she said, "....Sucked me into a little trap."

Seven years ago, Donna left her husband of 13 years; he had made her feel like she was "nuthin [*sic*]." Then followed a period of time in another state when she and her boyfriend were doing drugs; everyone they hung out with was on drugs and on welfare. They moved here 3 years ago and have been doing "so much better." They stopped doing drugs and drinking. Donna is not sure

what brought about the change except that they were tired of just existing, and they had to think of the three kids.

Nancy has been on and off welfare for "a long time"—16 years, starting when she had her first daughter at the age of 17. She did drugs, drank, and moved around a lot. In 1984, she remarried and quit doing drugs and drinking. She and her second husband had two children, but the relationship was not a good one. When they broke up in 1990, she went "straight back to drinking." Nancy had worked off and on, but she had gone back on welfare in 1988 when her second daughter was born. She stayed on because her husband was not working, and she got pregnant again. She felt she could not afford to get off welfare; jobs would not pay enough—$5 an hour—and she would be spending $3 an hour for child care. In 1991, she moved to Portland to live with an old roommate and began to attend Alcoholics Anonymous. In July 1992, she celebrated 1 year of being "clean and sober."

B. Attitudes About Welfare

Uppermost in most women's minds was the extremely limited income that they were stretching to provide for their families. Bobbi, whose rent was more than her monthly grant, was especially frustrated: "Who likes to be poor?" Terry, in her calm, understated way, expressed the same sentiments: "I don't think there's [*sic*] too many of us that really want to be on welfare—it's hardly anything to live on." Sally admitted to being "kinda [*sic*] ashamed," but she was philosophical about the hardships of being on welfare:

> *Welfare supports me and I've really realized lately that having been on welfare has benefited me. I probably would have taken a different route, but welfare has taught me to live hard and to still make it and never run out of toilet paper.*

The women in this group were painfully aware of the socially prevalent meanings of being on welfare. Maureen's comments revealed the traditional role she accepted for herself as well as the societal values she has internalized about welfare. She talked about being on welfare for 7 years "with no hope of getting off unless I found a man with money—a man with his life together and a good job and an interest in raising my kids. What would he want to do with women on welfare with no drive or future....You attract what you are." Talking later about the impact of the JOBS program on her, Maureen's feelings about being on welfare (and about schooling) showed through. She realized that the biggest impact

has been on her attitude. "[I'm] no longer sitting, 'I'm on welfare, I'm one of those girls'...a statistic—a flunk out with a bad attitude."

Donna exclaimed, "I don't like welfare, never have. It's embarrassing!" She readily acknowledged, however, that "for now" it is helping her and in more than one way (referring to education as well as economic support). Nancy showed her understanding of society's view of welfare recipients when she commented, while talking about how the program has helped her go to school: "[I] didn't have to feel like just a welfare mother [with] all these college people." Helen candidly acknowledged that she "had an attitude" prior to this program, explaining that "when you've been out of work so long, it's easy to get that attitude." Marty also explained that women on welfare can be "negative, nonmotivated, pessimistic about the future, no hope, stuck in a rut."

Gloria (who was not formally interviewed) talked during a class break about how she used to have stereotypes about people on welfare. She moved here with her husband because of his job. He had a good job, but developed alcohol and drug problems. "It became an abusive situation," and suddenly Gloria and her daughter found themselves in a shelter. She found it very difficult to be on welfare. She was "not proud of it" and wanted to get off. She and her daughter were embarrassed to use their food stamps. In fact, her daughter went to stores where no one knew her. They got dirty looks and remarks from the checkers; Gloria guessed it was because of the way she carried herself—she did not look like their stereotype of someone on food stamps. She felt that she had really learned a lot about people and herself this past year. She now "zips her lip" and does not judge people because it is impossible to tell what has happened to someone to put them in that position.

3. "GOING BACK TO SCHOOL"

A. ADULT EDUCATION EXPERIENCES

Over half (8 of the 15) of the women in this group had had no experience with adult education at all since leaving high school. Donna was the only one who reported having been inclined to try, but she was painfully burned on her first exploration of the possibility of taking some college courses. As she told it, once when she still lived in another state, she and a friend decided to take a college entrance exam. It turned out to be the "worst mistake" that Donna had ever made—she ended up feeling like she did not know anything. The strong impact that the experience had on her was still evident as she commented that she thought, "that's as far as *I* go. I ain't [*sic*] trying *that* again. I see where I stand."

Donna explained that her friend was younger and closer to her school experience so she did better. That exam was 5 years ago, and Donna had not tried any other adult education option since that time until she was required to enter the Pathways to Progress program.

Five women had passed their GED tests prior to participating in Pathways to Progress. One other woman had been enrolled in a community college GED program the previous year, attending two nights a week from September until June, but she "didn't get *nothing* [*sic*] out of it." She had been going through some stressful situations at the time, and she also felt that the instructors did not work with the students. The ratio was 30 students to an instructor and a tutor. She never did take a GED test because the price doubled, and she could not afford it and did not feel ready.

Six women (including the five who had obtained their GEDs) had had some experience with adult education or training, ranging from an art correspondence course to "almost 3 years minus 2 terms" of community college. Judy had taken a course toward her high school diploma when she was about 19. Then, 6 or 7 years later, she enrolled in a community college program designed for women re-entering the workforce. After completing that, she got her GED. When she was first married, Helen had done a 12-month home study course to get a certificate from an art institute. She had started on a second 12-month course but never completed it. Since that time (13 to 14 years ago), she had not enrolled in any education or training program and did not yet have her GED.

Three of the other women had taken some vocational courses. Elaine got her GED 10 years ago. "I just thought I wanted to have that." A year and a half ago she got a grant to go to beautician school after she got out of alcohol detoxification treatment. She had always wanted to be a beautician, but quickly found it was not for her. Terry studied at a local trade school to be a legal secretary "and almost completed it," but she could not get through the accounting. She took the class two times and "just couldn't get it." Sally took a couple of night courses in accounting at a local community college and also attended a business computer training institute. She groaned about the loan she incurred there, but was proud of the fact that she has started to pay it back. When asked about any other adult education, she laughed and reported that she watches a lot of public television.

Marty was the exception in this group—the student par excellence. Now 34, she got her GED when she was 21 (and her daughter was 3) because she wanted to go to community college

"and for my dad." She started college the following fall, beginning a series of explorations into commercial art, industrial drafting (2 terms), general education (3 terms, with a 3.8 GPA), and occupational therapy—all tempered by events in her private life, including a violent, abusive relationship. School seems to have been a safe haven for Marty. When her caseworker mistakenly told her that she would have to quit to continue to receive AFS for her daughter, she had a psychological breakdown that led to a suicide attempt. At 24, she was declared psychologically disabled. Two years later, she began what would become a stable relationship and subsequently had two more children. At age 30, while in counseling for her teenage daughter, she discovered her own history of sexual abuse. Since then, she has done "major hard work," going to therapy twice a week and going through drug rehabilitation. Last year, when the JOBS program participation was mandatory for her, her therapist got her a psychological disability. This year, scared, but ready to make the transition, she entered Pathways to Progress.

B. EXPECTATIONS ON ENTERING THE C&LP CLASS

Most participants entered the class with a lot of uncertainty about what was in store for them. As Helen put it:

> *You practically had to drag me there behind a 4-wheel drive. I loathed it. I thought 'Wonderful. I'm going back to school—I'm not gonna [sic] learn a thing. I'll go through the whole program and still be in the same hole I'm in now.'...I had no expectations in the least. I thought it was just another thing the Government was trying out to get votes. A half-baked idea—oh well, another one....*

Others, like Bobbi, felt put upon: "It's not like I chose it." Corinne said, "Welfare told me I have to do this—something I had to do...with AFS you jump....I wasn't thrilled the first week, but then loosening up and talking, it got easier." In retrospect, Jackie noted apologetically that before she went she thought it was "...stupid. Why should I take the time when I could be out there looking for work?" Sally was bugged by being directed to be there, but she knew her goal was to get a nontraditional job (and she has completed training for that).

In retrospect, most of the women interviewed expressed neutral or positive expectations. This may, in part, reflect the influence of the training itself. During the first day or two, instructors acknowledged that individuals might be reluctant or resentful participants and recognized their right to hold that attitude, stating,

"You have 100% control over how you view this 4 weeks—nobody can take that control away." However, they went on to point out the power of viewing the experience as a means for going beyond welfare and state control—the power of believing in yourself and in taking charge of your life.

Those who expressed positive expectations thought that it might help them to figure out what kind of job they wanted. Donna thought, "Good, maybe I can get something better in life." Her boyfriend was supportive, saying that it would be good for her and that she could find something that she ***wanted*** to do, not something she ***had*** to do. Maureen looked at it as a stepping stone to what she was going to do (get her GED and go to college). She had mixed feelings, finding it both scary and exciting. After days of struggle to get into a routine of leaving her kids and going to and from class, she got to the point of being excited to go. Elaine wanted to build up her self-esteem. She did not think that she *could* get a job in an office. Marty thought that the program would help her gain direction regarding her skill level out in the professional world. She acknowledged that she resents being made to do this and not being home with her kids, but as long as it is mandatory, she feels she might as well use it as a benefit and get the most out of it.

C. PERCEPTIONS OF SKILLS AND NEEDS

Not only have many of these women internalized societal messages about the self-worth of individuals on welfare, but most of them have also grown up with the stigma of having dropped out of school. The pervasive assumption that the number of years of schooling an individual has completed equals his or her level of literacy skills in adulthood placed a heavy burden on them. This burden was further loaded by the commonly held belief that literacy/schooling equals competence. Individuals who did not finish school, for whatever reason, are not considered to be as competent as those who did. Women like Donna, Maureen, and Bobbi came into this program thinking that they were dummies. They left the C&LP class admitting that they found out they are not "as dumb" as they thought. Some, like Nancy, did not think that they would do as well as they did on their GED. Helen studied and took her GED in one week, to her great surprise.

Most had doubts about their abilities to go back to school. Helen knew her reading and comprehension skills were high, but felt that "everything else was close to ground zero." She knew that she would enjoy the paperwork required for studying to work in a medical office, but doubted that she could pull off the spelling and

writing. For Terry and Marty, math had been hard in high school. That perception had been confirmed for Terry when she could not complete her legal secretary training because of the accounting course.

Some knew that they had good basic skills. Judy shamelessly joked, "I'm smart. What can I say?" She did have among the highest test scores of the class. However, she admitted that English was hard for her; she can read and comprehend when something is wrong, but she does not know what to call it. Becka was also clear about the high level of her basic skills. Marty proudly reported that her English score was so high that it could not be recorded. She feels she has always been an English major—"naturally."

This group clearly had varying levels of basic skills and varying degrees of concern about their skills when they entered this program. Not one of them would have said that she was functionally illiterate. Not one was in this welfare reform education program because of an inability to survive for lack of basic skills. Basic literacy was not an issue for the women who had been mandated and selected to participate in this program. Yet, lack of previous schooling looms large in their understanding of themselves and their abilities. The message that they have received loudly and clearly from society is that education is the ticket to a better job and a better life. They viewed the fact that they did not get an education when they were teenagers as a big mistake. As Donna put it, "People don't want to give you a chance unless you're well educated." However, she went on in the next breath to show her strong sense of personal ability by saying, "Show me and I can do it." This illustrates the often contradictory feelings engendered by being put in a position as an adult to have to confront one's own lack of schooling.

4. Key Intervention Components

A. Strengthening Self-Esteem

The words of the participants in this study have demonstrated that the shame of being on welfare and the frustration of being extremely poor and having little control over one's life because of the power and control exercised by the welfare bureaucracy ("with AFDC you jump") have had an impact. In their review of the literature for the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility (established in an unusual, preventive attempt by the state in the late 1980s to address social problems), Schneiderman, Furman, and Weber (1989, p. 238) concluded that "some research plausibly suggests that long-term welfare dependence may undermine an individual's perceived

capacity to exercise control over events in his or her personal life." They are careful to note, however, that the reverse and commonly held assumption that low self-esteem has predictable behavioral consequences necessarily associated with low motivation or lack of initiative and social responsibility is *not* supported by the empirical literature. As a result of this research, the task force recommended the support and implementation of "programs that assist long-term welfare recipients to grow in self-esteem and responsibility so they can move from the welfare rolls to independence" (California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility, 1990, p. 122).

B. CAREER EXPLORATION AND INDIVIDUAL CHOICE

Perhaps one of the strongest messages that participants in the class heard was that they had something to say about the career they were expected to pursue through this program. Although there were limitations regarding the amount of time an individual could devote to study and training (from 9 months to a year maximum), participants were not expected to just "fill out lots of job applications and get a job," as Becka put it. She described the program well: "*This* program is for people who want to *learn*...They're [the program staff] willing to take the time to help you. They want you to find something you can be happy with....The class didn't focus on just getting the highest paying job—but one you'll be happy with." Many participants found that to be an important distinction.

In his discussion of long-term poverty and motivation, Kane (1987) attempts to understand attitudinal deficits produced by constrained opportunities and stigmatizing labels. He explores expectancy theory regarding outcome and a sense of control over it and learned helplessness as a response to continued lack of control. Kane notes that "repeated experience with lack of control or being labeled as incompetent makes it less likely that people will recognize potentially effective actions later" (p. 411). He applies this to welfare reform efforts to discourage dependency and concludes that giving individuals opportunities to make choices can help them gain a sense of control and thus lead to more lasting results.

Most of the participants in C&LP were required to be there. (A few volunteered to participate before it would become mandatory for them.) Some individuals who are mandated to attend the Career and Life Planning Track opt out anyway, finding a way to be deferred a bit longer. In the cohort studied here, only one person failed to return to class after the first day. Of the remaining 27, no

one missed class more than twice in the month, and 14 proudly had perfect attendance. As the course progressed, they began to take hold of the choices and the control that they were being offered. It was up to them to identify personal interests and related potential careers, then research local training options to come up with a viable plan to present to their caseworkers at the end of the 4-week class. Together with a C&LP instructor and their caseworker, they then developed an Employment Development Plan (EDP) with an employment goal and specific study or training steps to achieve it.

C. "DUCKS IN A ROW"

Another critical component of this intervention, described earlier regarding participant selection for C&LP, was the importance placed on "having all your ducks in a row." This may seem like a simple screening, even creaming, mechanism. However, it represents overt recognition of the multiple influences on participants' lives and on their motivation to participate. It also exemplifies for participants the importance of having as much control over their own environments as possible. During the 4 weeks of the class, participants' ongoing struggles to maintain that organization and control over their responsibilities in their day-to-day lives and their ability to do so were recognized and reinforced.

D. SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

The intensive ABE/GED study built into the Career and Life Planning Track was a fourth essential component of the intervention. After the month-long C&LP class, the staff recommended that 23 of the 27 continue on to the ABE/GED program. Nine of the 23 needed to study for their GED tests; the other 14 had specific basic skills that they needed to brush up on as part of their "next steps." Four of the participants had their high school diploma or GED and had received 12th-grade ratings on all three categories of reading, math, and writing on the TABE. They were referred directly to begin to pursue the steps that they had identified in their EDPs. One has completed a 5-month construction training course; another is enrolled in a 6-month program to become a medical assistant; a third is studying office technology; and the fourth, after completing 3 months of work experience in a social service agency, is currently enrolled in general secretarial studies.

As noted earlier, 7 of the 23 individuals have been temporarily deferred from following their plans. The other 16 are working at their own individual pace. Two received their GEDs within 1 to 4 weeks and are currently enrolled in community college courses

which move them toward their goals of medical receptionist and instructional aide/special education. After approximately five months of study, four are nearly finished with their GEDs, having passed most of the tests. Of the other 10 participants, 5 were interviewed. One studied office technology and is currently working as a temporary receptionist while applying for full-time work; two are doing work experience in their chosen fields (shipping and receiving and community policing), one while continuing to go to school; two others are enrolled in community college basic education and study skills courses in preparation for further studies.

5. Motivating Factors

A. Multiple Reasons

Despite the fact that the majority of participants were mandated to be in this program, they expressed a variety of motivations for participating. Women in the Career and Life Planning class were participating in response to some very concrete, basic needs as well as to more individual and symbolic motives. Of course, their presence in class ensured them of continued *income for basic survival* (their welfare grants), a powerful motivation. As noted earlier, these mothers were very concerned with their *children's well-being*, and they seemed to be aware of both short-term and long-term issues—ensuring that their children's day-to-day material needs were met as well as providing for them in the future. Thus, they anticipated the need to prepare for and find *better jobs* that would provide sufficient income to cover not only basic shelter and food costs, but also child care (a new cost) and medical coverage, which was previously covered by welfare. This was a very strong motivating factor, but one that caused considerable anxiety, stress, and self-doubts. Related to income and a good job, several women expressed the need that they feel for *independence*, to be in charge of their own financial decisions and to have some control and power over their money and their lives.

These mothers were also aware of the need to be good *role models for their children*. They wanted their children to have good values and positive self-esteem as they grew into adulthood. Jackie wanted her children to "bloom into their potential" and not have to face discouragement like she did. Sally hoped that when her child leaves her care, he would have emotional understanding and be a well-rounded person who is responsible and committed to things—something she felt she did not learn, but is learning. Marty had an eloquent list:

Most of all, I want them to be happy. With their happiness they'll have their success. I want them to know that they can make mistakes...and have the motivation to learn from their mistakes...have their sense of self, be able to protect themselves, be independent human beings who can depend on themselves and make it in this troubling world. I want them to experience love. And I want them to have an interest in learning, learning new things, and be flexible human beings. (All things I want for me, too!)

As the class progressed, the women began to participate for themselves also. They began to realize that it was "okay" to be doing something for themselves, for *self-improvement*. For some, it was as simple as the personal need to "get the hell off welfare." For others, it was a challenge, something they needed to prove to themselves. As Donna put it, "I got to prove a point to myself that I *can* and *will* do it! I am *not* a quitter." Nancy said that the best thing about the JOBS program is that "you have an identity. For *you*, yourself to do, not just work but to build your own life, to be self-supporting." Marty remarked that she was doing for herself for a change. She realized that she would still be doing for everyone else and not herself if the program had not been mandatory.

These motivational categories are quite similar to those identified by Beder and Valentine in their study of adult basic education students (1990). They found 10 basic motivations for attending ABE: self-improvement, family responsibilities, diversion, literacy development, community/church involvement, job advancement, launching, economic need, educational advancement, and urging of others. The C&LP women's stated motivations fit many of these. In addition, their participation could definitely be considered "launching" to a self-sufficient, self-directed life. Beder and Valentine also speculated that literacy education, in addition to being a means to acquire skills, is both a *symbolic activity* and a *vestibule activity*. A symbolic activity is one in which learners may expunge their internalized and socially reinforced feelings of inadequacy. A vestibule activity is needed to enable participants to be ready, both psychologically and logistically, to make further changes in their lives. As has been seen, participation in this program has served both of those purposes for most of these women.

B. MOTIVATION IN CONTEXT AND MOTIVATIONAL RELEVANCE

One of the main purposes of this paper has been to situate the issue of motivation to participate, or the apparent lack of it, in the context of individuals' lives. Fingeret (1983a, 1983b, 1991), Horsman (1990), Rockhill (1983), and Ziegahn (1992) each eloquently raise the issue of needing to understand the perspectives of "nonparticipants," in order to see the complexities of their lives and, thus, the larger contexts surrounding and beyond participation. Rockhill aptly focuses the discussion on participation as an act that takes place in a sociocultural context, not in isolation. She points out that approaching participation as a problem of motivation risks minimizing situational factors that play a strong role in participation. To better describe what is happening in adults' lives, she coins the term *motivational relevance*, which includes individuals' selective attention, as well as the diverse and sometimes contradictory ways in which adults define their situations. The pressures and demands of others which pull at adults and the ways they respond reflect sound individual values and choices. Ziegahn points out a basic bias in the research on participation by reminding the reader that middle class, literate adults also worry about money, rely on family and friends for support, are concerned about other people's expectations, and are not necessarily future-oriented, risk-oriented, or free of neuroses. She challenges readers to dare to "leave behind the labels of disadvantage and deficit" (p. 33).

Horsman and Ziegahn both call attention to the social context of women's lives and its impact on their participation. Horsman found that women's erratic participation in adult education is more reflective of their situations at home than it is of their motivation to learn (p. 146). Among the deterrents to participation identified by Ziegahn was the tendency of women who saw themselves primarily in the private or home domain to define themselves in terms of connection, caring, and their response to others (p. 45). She provides an insight that could easily sum up much of the philosophy behind the Career and Life Planning class: "Trying to find a 'self' in these webs of caring was not an easy task, but one that could arguably constitute the first step toward identifying oneself as a learner."

6. Impact of the Intervention to Date

A. Perception of Skills

After 6 to 7 months of participation in this program, how did individuals perceive their skills? The majority felt better about their reading, math, or writing skills, and many mentioned other types of skills that they had acquired while in the program. Those who were in the final stages of studying to pass their GED reported improvements in spelling, reading, math (fractions, decimals and percentages), algebra, and geometry ("schooling stuff I didn't do before"). Bobbi noted that she does have trouble comprehending what she reads and that she is not a good reader. However, when questioned about the parenting and plant books that she talked about using on her own, she pointed out that she can and does read "if it's interesting to me."

Those who were in intensive ABE also noted improvements. Two who had had difficulty with math in high school found it easier this time. Some felt they were able to retain things better than they had before. Two who felt they had done well on their tests at Pathways to Progress were surprised and disappointed to have difficulty with community college placement exams. Corinne felt bored in her basic courses and ambivalent about whether or not she needed the brush-up. Jackie felt "stupid" during the college tests, remarking that she "just barely made it into the program." She thought perhaps her poor showing was due in part to feeling like there was so much riding on it. But she is happy in her courses and proud to be in school.

Helen's feelings about what she is learning were radically different from her heavy skepticism and sarcasm when she entered the program. She nearly waxed poetic about her community college instructor: "Excellent instructor. One of the best I've had. It makes a big difference if you look forward to seeing her....Educators must be the type that make you *want* to go."

Other skills that participants reported to have acquired or improved through the program to date include: interpersonal communication skills, setting goals and accomplishing them, assertiveness, typing, 10-key, computer skills, identifying resources, and networking.

B. Self-Concept

By the end of the first week of the C&LP class, perceptions were already changing, as illustrated in these two excerpts from a writing assignment:

My first week in C&LP, I have decided to look at my own personal life as something to look forward to.

My first week in C&LP I was very scared to come here and participate in this class but after this first week, I feel so much better. I feel better about myself and what Im [sic] going to accomplish in my life. I know now Im [sic] gonna [sic] do this and do the best that i [sic] can. I have more self esteem than I think Ive [sic] had in along time.

At the end of the month-long class, the following sentiments were expressed in statements written for the author about the class and about making changes in one's life:

I am getting to find out who I am and to have selfworth [sic]. I know I have choices today that I didn't know I had. I get to start depending on myself and not the system.

I came into this class, confused, scared, dreding, [sic] wanting to go home. I'm still scared, but the confusion, and dred [sic] are gone. And the fright is easier to handle because its [sic] combined with Excitement [sic].

When I first began this class—[C&LP], I was a bit apprehensive. But over the course of these last few weeks, I feel I have become more aware of myself in a more possitive [sic] way. I finially [sic] feel I have some sense of direction. It/the [sic] class, has been really good for my morale. It's almost like being "uncovered"—after years of being "buried." I also feel—the more steps I make, successfully—the better I will feel about myself & my future.

I think that everyone should be able to come to a class like this one, it could change their lives for the better.

[Pathways to Progress] has tried to tear away the years of stereotypical attitude, hates, wants, and dumb notions, as if peeling a [sic] orange to get to the good stuff, self asteem [sic] increases, but so do the fears, but they teach us how to deal w/ obsacales [sic]. I feel for some reason, that I should of [sic] been taught these thing [sic] long

ago, I will pass on "to my son" what I have learnd [sic]. I am unable to put my finger on it, but I know I have changed becuz [sic] of this class, and it feels good.

This class has helped me to understand alittle [sic] more about the changes in my life and the experience that I have felt are [sic] normal feelings. I have made changes to feel more positive about my selfworth [sic]. To be more positive to encourage myself to do the best to my abilities. I plan to go through school to get the training I need to be a more self-supporting, independent and a positive aspect of society. I plan to change the way I feel about myself so I can be a positive influence in my children's lifes [sic].

Change of any kind can be very hard sometimes. Even though the changes we're going through are for the best I'm still afraid...can I do this?? Will I succeed? Will I fail?? This is not a desirable change for me, and by this I mean, the years that have come between myself and the work force...low self-esteem...make the change more difficult and the climb harder. I want this, but I'm a little scared. I believe this class has boosted my self esteem somewhat, but I think if there were more ways of boosting self-esteem in such a short period of time it would be good for future classes.

Five to six months later, a sense of positive change in self-concept persists for most of the women. They were asked about it in different ways: Has how you feel about yourself changed since you entered this JOBS program? How has all this affected your life so far? Have you learned some things in this process? Are there things you can do now that you could not or would not do before you entered the program?

All except 2 of the 15 women interviewed were very enthusiastic about the changes they had noticed in themselves and gave positive examples. Judy and Sally (whose high scores exempted them from ABE brush-up) seemed to be taking a hard look at what they were doing. Sally said that maybe she has changed the way she looks at herself: "...the way I see what I can do—because it's realistic. I know what skills I possess—target what I *can* do versus want to do." Judy feels more insecure. With more challenges, she has become concerned about making it.

Many talked about improved self-esteem or confidence. For some this translated into being more assertive and more communicative in groups. Donna explained, "Learned about myself....that I'm not as dumb as I thought. I *do* matter. People can't stop me because of who and what I am....Learned to stand up for myself." The biggest influence on Maureen has been that now she is *proud:* "I'm gonna [*sic*] show people I will be good, I'm gonna [*sic*] accomplish [things]..." She will make people feel glad that they have invested time and money in her and "it's paid off." Bobbi admitted that she does feel better about herself now; she knows more than she thought. "My ex can't put me down any more." Jackie was feeling very negative about herself before the C&LP class. She felt she probably would never have thought of going back to school without the encouragement. She also learned to be more assertive and was able to speak up to her lawyer about his handling of her divorce case. Tiffany was very positive about her progress in her classes ("Everyone's asking me for help."). Her words rang with added confidence: "I learned I *am* bright—yes, I *can* do this." Terry, who was terrified to go to the class because of her isolation for so many years, remarked, "It's easier to be in groups and in work and to get to know people 'cuz [*sic*] I know I can do that....I was telling someone at welfare [who was about to start the C&LP class], 'You're gonna [*sic*] *love* that class.'"

7. Perceived Opportunity Structure

A. The Concept

The literature on participation and this research suggest that motivation is intimately related to individuals' perceptions of themselves, their environments or life contexts, and their relative control over their lives. Adults develop these perceptions as they proceed through life, in response to their experiences interacting with other individuals and their changing environment. These perceptions can be described with the term *perceived opportunity structure,* which refers to an individual's expectations about what kinds of situations will arise and what their outcomes will be. Central to this concept is an emphasis on self-direction and self-regulation in forming these perceptions and motivating action based on them. This complex of perceptions—encompassing one's expected opportunities, control over fate in making the most of them, and belief in the chances of success—may affect the investment people are willing to make in improving their basic literacy skills and acquiring other new skills (Reder et al., 1991). Individuals' perceptions of reality are the key. Adults experiencing similar circumstances (such as difficulties in finding adequate child care, stable housing, or appropriate training options) may respond

in very different ways (with dogged determination or total defeat, for example) depending on how their previous experiences and concepts of self have led them to develop expectations.

Without recognizing the term *perceived opportunity structure,* the Career and Life Planning Track of the Pathways to Progress program focused on developing and changing the ways that participants perceived themselves and the opportunities that they had to develop their skills and become self-sufficient. There is evidence of positive changes in individuals' concepts of self, skills, and sense of choice and personal control regarding steps toward self-sufficiency. The following is a brief look at the women's perceptions of the future.

B. CAREER GOALS

As part of the C&LP track, all of these women had to identify a job or, preferably, a career goal toward which to work. A few continue to be unsure, but nearly everyone identified specific interests that they wanted to pursue. The majority were positions commonly held by women: office worker, medical office worker, hospital shipping and receiving clerk, medical assistant, teacher's aide, floral designer, and social service worker. Only two in the group were interested in nontraditional trades such as construction. The emphasis on traditional careers is not surprising, given the traditional caregiver roles these women have been playing for much of their lives.

C. FUTURE EDUCATIONAL GOALS

Over half of the women interviewed expressed interest in further education beyond their current training plans. For some it is a means to achieving their career goals. Maureen would really like to be a midwife. Her long-range goal is to take night classes to become an RN while she is working as a medical assistant. Jackie also wants to go further in the medical field, although she has not zeroed in on one position. She is interested in physician's assistant, nursing in pediatrics or ob-gyn, respiratory or physical therapist. Judy's ultimate goal is to be a parent trainer for a state social service agency. For that, she feels she needs a degree in psychology.

Others are aware that they will probably need to upgrade their skills to advance their careers. Helen assumes that she will not stay in the same job indefinitely and may need to take night courses to advance. Corinne wants to work her way up in hospital administration. She is thinking through all her options for financing her bachelor's degree, and she thinks that she may go

after a master's. When asked why, she replied that her mother had a degree and advised her to get one. Corinne pointed out that competition will always be stiff, and if you want an executive job, "a master's looks good."

Several others expressed interest in a degree for some intrinsic value that it holds for them. When asked about plans for further education, Elaine responded, "not unless I have to," and then proceeded to say, "but I have in the back of my mind taking an English class just to get it *right*—to [be able to] tell my daughter." Becka plans to be working as a medical assistant in a hospital, but she always thought that she would go to college and is convinced that she will do more college later. Marty is interested in becoming a community police officer, but is discouraged about the requirement to go through the regular police academy training. In the meantime, she has pursued and secured a clerical work experience position in a community policing department. She has identified being a "group leader" in a home for troubled children as a medium-range goal. She wants to get her BA, then MA and PhD, saying, "Oh, I *will*—because I love to learn. It's a mastery of my own self." Tiffany thinks she will go back to school after a couple of years, "maybe get some kind of degree...because it's something I wanted before...[It is] more for myself—to prove that I can be challenged, accepted it and proved it."

D. VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

Several women talked about the impact of this program in the stark terms of simply having a future. Their blunt words illustrate the magnitude of the process that they are going through: "I've decided to look at my own life as something to look forward to." "It means there's absolutely a hope for the future." "What does it mean? A *new* life." "Mostly [it's affected] my attitude about my future....I'm more courageous now than before." "It gave me more of a sense of the future and that I *had* one. Self-empowerment, and *I* would be *able* to have a future."

When they thought about where they will be in 3 years, they all painted positive pictures: a good job; making good money, being secure; supporting themselves and their families ("an absolutely wonderful feeling"); with good credit; in school. Seven months after starting this process, they are still feeling positive about the courses that they are charting for themselves. Their hopes may be high and their goals may be more difficult to achieve than they had anticipated. They do know that it has not been easy so far. Sally said that the best part about this program is that it has helped

her to build a foundation; and the worst part was actually building it.

Each woman was asked what would keep her from achieving her vision of where she will be in 3 years. Some very openly identified their own personal deterrents: flaking off and quitting; drinking; doubt; money and maybe another baby; not having state support. However, two thirds were enthusiastic in their conviction that ***nothing*** short of a serious illness (their own or that of a child) could keep them from their goals. They were also clear on what would help them stay on track and realize the future that they envision. The majority stressed the importance of attitude and moral support. As Marty summed it up, "Maintaining the health, vigor, and motivation I have right now."

E. Conclusions and Implications

These observations hold useful implications for the continuing development of theory as well as practice in the field of adult literacy education. This study attempts to bring needed clarity to the definition of literacy by reversing the direction of the lens and viewing the meanings of literacy and basic skills training from the perspectives of the individuals who appear to be lacking in basic skills, rather than from the point of view of a society trying to fix "deficient" individuals. The women's voices heard here illustrate the complexity of adults' lives and the multiple influences on adult participation in training for skills improvement. The willingness of this group of women to share their experiences and perspectives has provided a better understanding of the much pursued concept of "motivation" and of the need to situate it within the context of people's lives. Indeed, this concept, as conventionally used, limits understanding of participation, rather than helping to explain it. The observations from this fieldwork corroborate Rockhill's (1983) suggestion that approaching participation as a problem of motivation may lead to making assumptions that are detrimental to adult learning. Nearly all adults are motivated to learn in some context. Attributing lack of participation in adult education and training programs to lack of motivation fails to recognize and build on adults' innate capabilities and curiosities for learning.

The adults in this welfare reform training program were reluctant to participate. The majority of them would not have enrolled if it had not been necessary for continued receipt of welfare benefits. For many of these women, formal education had not been a positive experience, and few had enrolled in adult education classes prior to being required to participate in this program. Nevertheless, these women identified reasons for wanting further education or training. As noted earlier, their "motivations" were very similar to those of adult basic education students as identified by Beder and Valentine (1990). For many of these women, their participation in further educational training had been inhibited by their acceptance of powerful and prevalent societal values equating completion of schooling (high school diploma) with competence and individual worth—despite the fact that most of them were not lacking in basic skills. For the majority of this group, the C&LP training program became what Beder and Valentine term a *symbolic activity* (helping participants begin to rid themselves of their internalized feelings of inadequacy) as well

as a *vestibule activity* (preparing them to be able to make further changes).

This study has illustrated the effectiveness of a strong incentive imposed by changing environmental demands. The women in this program took, however, reluctantly and hesitantly, the initial step to participate because of the built-in financial incentive. Yet once beyond the vestibule, these women had their own individualized (and sometimes very powerful) incentives for continued participation.

Perhaps the most important contribution that this study makes to the field of adult literacy development is the exploration of the concept of *perceived opportunity structure* as essential to understanding motivation and participation. This concept shares some fundamental components with other explanatory models of adult participation in learning mentioned earlier: the critical role of individuals' perceptions of their environment and of their own control over it (Rubenson, 1977); the importance of self-concept in determining individuals' responses to other influences and situations (Cross, 1981); and the value of considering individuals' positions and perspectives on their life space, life events, transitions, and stages (Cookson, 1986; Cross, 1981; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1981). This research studied adult participation in an intervention that identified early the critical link between participants' perceptions of self and environment (and their control over it) and their continued participation and progress in the training program. By enhancing individuals' self-esteem and encouraging structure ("ducks in a row"), career knowledge, and skills improvement as the foundations for empowerment, the Career and Life Planning Track of Pathways to Progress is helping adults to place their learning in their own personally relevant contexts. The result appears to be "motivation" to continue to participate in skills development.

The implications for policy and practice are clear. Policymakers and educators can improve the ways that they address the training needs of adults who, for a myriad of reasons, do not seek formal instruction.

- Policymakers and practitioners need to beware of unfounded assumptions about adults' "lack of motivation" to participate.
- Programs can encourage participation and help adults lay the groundwork for subsequent learning and skills development by offering them tools to

help them articulate their personal life goals and the relationship of learning to attaining those goals. Program practices that address individuals' views of their lives, their sense of self, and their power to control their environments as an essential part of setting the direction for the learning process can have a positive impact on participation.

- Programs with a very specific focus (for example, a focus entirely on job skills) may need to adopt a more holistic view of their clients in order to be able to encourage and facilitate personally relevant participation and skill development.

- Incentives that increase participation can be built into adult training program environments.

- Congruence between program and participant goals and reasons for learning can strengthen participation and retention of adult learners.

The opportunities awaiting the women who participated in this study are great, but so are the challenges. To what degree these women continue to develop their skills and apply them in the contexts of their lives remains to be seen.

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